

THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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a NEW short story by

JACK RITCHIE

"I thought about that for some minutes and then came squarely to the point. How was I going to get away with murder?"

THE ORANGE MURDERS

by JACK RITCHIE

I do not remember what the argument had been about—there were so many—but we had been at breakfast. I snatched the knife from the table and stabbed my wife.

In falling, her hand convulsively closed over one of the oranges on the table. She now lay dead on the floor, the orange still gripped in her hand.

I stared at the knife I still held. Both my hand and the weapon were bloody and my next impulse was to clean them immediately. I went to the sink, washed and dried the knife with a dishtowel, and then put it away in a counter drawer.

I was now completely calm—though perhaps calmness at a time like that is simply a high form of hysteria.

What should I do now? Phone the police?

I thought about that without enthusiasm. No, not just yet. Despite the fact that I was possessed by this calmness—almost serenity—I felt that I could not face the police just yet.

I found myself putting on my topcoat and my hat, as I always did on weekdays at this time of the morning. I went out to the garage and got into my car.

Yes, that was it. I would go for a refreshing drive while I mulled things over and *then* I would go to the police.

I drove east and I realized with a bit of surprise that I was actually driving to work.

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I shrugged. Well, why not? What was the hurry in going to the police anyway?

I parked my car in its usual spot in the company parking lot and went up to my desk on the third floor of the McNeil Construction Company.

I am an accountant and while my job requires diligence, it by no means occupies all of my mind. I frequently find myself hard at work, while half of my brain dwells on other matters, as it did now.

It was really unfair, I thought. Basically, Eunice *deserved* to die. Not that I would cold-bloodedly have done the deed. It had occurred in one rash spur of the moment. There had been no premeditation or planning.

Then *why* should I now have to spend the rest of my life in prison for an uncontrollable spontaneous act? Was that a fair exchange for Eunice's death?

Certainly not.

I grew a bit indignant about the situation.

And yet the police would certainly arrest me. After all, my fingerprints were on the murder weapon, on the—

I blinked. But they *weren't*. I had forgotten that I had washed and wiped them off the knife.

I thought about that for some minutes and then came squarely to the point. How was I going to get away with murder?

Well, I would simply deny that I had killed Eunice and stick to that. When I had left for work, she had been alive and healthy.

Of course the police wouldn't believe me. I was the logical, and likely the only, suspect. However, wasn't the burden of proof for murder up to the state? Of course it was. A man was innocent until proved guilty, wasn't he? We were living in a democracy, weren't we?

The police would question me thoroughly. At length. But if I steadfastly denied everything, what *could* they really do? Without solid evidence. Or witnesses.

I dreaded having to go home at the end of the day and "discovering" the body of my wife; however, that was spared me.

Two police detectives—guided by our department supervisor—made their way to my desk at eleven o'clock. Eunice's body had been found by a neighbor who had dropped in to borrow laundry detergent.

I was taken to police headquarters. A Sergeant Jonas, a bulky grizzled veteran, appeared to be in charge of the case. He led the protracted questioning until finally my request to phone an attorney

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prevailed. I selected one at random from the yellow pages of the telephone book.

Young, eager, and a bit breathless, he soon made his appearance.

The questioning resumed, this time with my attorney present, and I stoutly continued to deny any part in Eunice's death.

Sergeant Jonas eventually asked if I would take a polygraph test.

"Certainly," I said. "I have absolutely nothing to hide."

My lawyer, as I expected, quickly interposed. We would not take the polygraph test. The results of polygraph testing are inconclusive. Besides, in our state, they cannot be admitted as evidence in court.

Sergeant Jonas dropped the subject, but the questioning resumed. At six o'clock my attorney reminded Jonas that while he had the right to question me, that questioning could not be continued until it became a physical ordeal. Since I had been in police hands since late morning, it was now up to them either to book me or to release me.

Jonas thought it over, and probably because he was getting nowhere with me, decided to let me go with the admonition that I was not to leave the city.

I took a taxi back to the company parking lot, retrieved my car, and drove home. I picked up the afternoon newspaper on the welcome mat as I entered the house.

I found a bare account of Eunice's death in the local section. The article mentioned that she had been found clutching an orange. It also contained the information that the police were questioning her husband.

I went into the kitchen to make myself a drink. Eunice's body had been removed, of course, but the dried blood and her chalked outline remained on the floor. I took my drink into the living room and sat down.

Would I be able to outlast the questioning? Day after day? Or, after a while, would I falter, begin to contradict myself, dig my own grave? Yes, there was the strong possibility that I might. If Jonas kept at me.

What could I possibly do to relieve the pressure?

Suppose the police were given a valid reason to suspect that someone else might have committed the murder? Some madman, perhaps?

I pondered. Well, why not give it a try? What did I have to lose?

I have a portable typewriter at home, but I decided not to use it

for my purpose. After all, the keys of each machine have distinctive characteristics, much like fingerprints.

I drove to a drugstore, picked up some stationery and stamps, then continued on to a branch of the public library where I knew that one could rent the services of a typewriter. I put a coin in the slot, sat down, and rolled a sheet of paper into the machine. I removed my gloves.

Dear Sirs:

My wife has run away with another man. I do not know where they are now. I may never be able to find them.

But she, and her kind, must pay. Must suffer. They are all alike. Jezebels. If I kill one of them, I kill my wife.

This morning I chose one of the creatures to pay the price for my wife's deceit and treachery. I stabbed her to death.

Fairly good, I thought, but it needed a touch more. Something that would tie it specifically to the murder of Eunice. Something distinctive. Ah, yes, I had it.

My wife's favorite color was orange. When I killed this woman whose name I do not know, I left an orange in her dead hand. It is my sign, my signature, to show that justice has been done.

I would send the unsigned letter to the police. But would they take it seriously? Was it possible that they might ignore the letter entirely, thinking that it was just the work of some crackpot who had read the account of the murder in the newspapers and decided to steal credit for the killing? Would they drop it into the nearest wastebasket? No, I simply couldn't have that.

I looked up addresses in the phone book and then made six more copies of the letter. In addition to the one sent to the police, I sent one each to the mayor of our city, the two daily newspapers, a Protestant clergyman noted for his Sunday TV sermons, a highly respected rabbi, and the bishop of the diocese. That ought to do it, I thought. Now the letter could not be suppressed or ignored.

The next morning at eleven thirty Jonas and his partner appeared at my door. He pulled an envelope from his coat pocket and handed it to me. It was one of the letters I had mailed the night before.

I read the single page, letting my eyes widen in the process. "This man killed Eunice? He is obviously insane. Have you arrested him?"

"Not yet." Jonas studied me. "Maybe he did commit the murder and maybe he didn't. Maybe he just wants a little attention. We get nuts like that all the time. There's another possibility."

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"What is that?"

Jonas smiled thinly. "Do you have a typewriter?"

I pretended naivete. "Yes, of course. A portable." Then I gave way to astonishment. "You don't think that I—"

"Could I see the typewriter?"

I brought him the portable.

He inserted a sheet of paper from his notebook into the machine. He typed only a half a dozen words before he realized that the portable's type was elite. The letter had been in pica.

"Do you have any other typewriter in the house?"

"No."

"Do you mind if we take a look?"

"Go right ahead."

Their search seemed competent enough, since they were looking for something as large as a typewriter, and I am certain that if there had been another one, they would have found it. After a half hour they gave up.

I could not resist rubbing it in. "I have a typewriter at my desk at the company. Would you like to compare that?"

"We will."

I did not, of course, go to work that day, and I would not until after Eunice's funeral.

The afternoon newspaper was delivered at four thirty. The story appeared on page one. *Officials, Clergymen Receive Murder Confession.* The text of the letter appeared in full. I wondered if that would have been done if only the police had received my letter. The article went on to say that the police were attempting to determine the identity of the letter writer. It also mentioned that they were continuing to question the dead woman's husband.

I sighed. Well, I had done all I could. I would leave it there and hope for the best.

The next morning I made my breakfast, took the tray into the living room, and turned on the TV set.

When the international and national news had been dispensed with, the newscaster turned to the local. It seemed that last night at nine P.M. one James Pennyfeather had been downstairs in his basement woodworking shop when he had heard a scream upstairs. He had rushed into the kitchen to find his wife dead on the floor. She had been stabbed once and on the palm of her right hand lay an orange. The kitchen door had been open to the night and Pennyfeather claimed that he had caught a glimpse of a fleeing figure.

He had phoned the police immediately. The murder weapon had not been found:

I spilled some of my coffee.

It was perfectly obvious what had happened. Pennyfeather had probably had an argument with his wife and stabbed her to death. And then, faced with punishment for murder, he had sought to cover up his part in the crime. The newspaper account of Eunice's murder and her orange, and also the printing of the murder confession were fresh in his mind. He had quickly washed and put away the murder weapon—as I had done—and got an orange out of the refrigerator. He had put the blame for the murder on my creation. *My Orange Murderer.*

I felt a touch of indignation. The man had stolen my *modus operandi*.

A picture of the murdered woman flashed on the screen of my mind, side by side with one of my wife. Frankly both women look quite alike. Frowning. Narrow-eyed. Mrs. Pennyfeather probably had been as large as Eunice. Short-tempered. Domineering.

My irritation faded when I saw the grieving husband. He seemed to be a rather small man. Probably hard-working and unappreciated. Undoubtedly he had been nagged to the limit and had exploded.

Actually Pennyfeather had done me a favor. Jonas hadn't really bought my creation of the Orange Murderer. Surely this would convince him.

Yes, Pennyfeather had done me a favor and I could help him in turn. And myself, of course. Wouldn't the Orange Murderer write another letter? It would be characteristic in a case like this, wouldn't it? A man with a mind like that would want to make certain that he received credit for the murder. Yes, another letter was called for.

I drove to the branch library and once again inserted paper into the typewriter.

Dear Sirs:

After killing that first woman, I thought that I would find rest, satisfaction, peace. But I was wrong.

I have not yet been fully avenged. Therefore last night I went out and killed again. I understand, from television, that her surname is Pennyfeather.

I mailed only three copies this time—to the police department, and one each to our daily newspapers. I thought that should be sufficient now that the world was aware of the Orange Murderer.

When I returned home, I found Jonas and his partner waiting on the porch.

I smiled. "I heard about it on TV this morning. The murder of another woman. Now are you convinced that there is some madman going about killing women he doesn't even know?"

"Maybe." Jonas studied me. "Where were you at approximately nine o'clock last night?"

The import of his question struck me immediately. I was aghast. "Do you think that I might have had something to do with the death of this Pennyfeather woman? But that is ridiculous."

He smiled, but without humor. "Let's suppose that you wrote that letter to all those important people as a cover-up for the murder of your wife. Wouldn't it follow that you might actually go out and commit another murder or two just to make us believe that there was such a thing as the Orange Murderer?"

"That would be insanity."

"I know," Jonas said. "We'd like you to come down to headquarters with us. We have a few more questions to ask you."

I phoned my lawyer before we left and he met us at headquarters. I was interrogated for five hours before Jonas released me again.

Eunice was buried on Saturday. After the funeral I stopped off at a liquor store to buy a bottle of bourbon. Ordinarily I am not a drinking man, but I felt I needed the support.

At home one drink led to another. I remember turning on the lamps when it got dark outside. Then I fell asleep on the couch.

I woke with morning sunlight in my face. I turned off the lamps and went to the bathroom for aspirins. When I returned, I fetched the Sunday morning paper from the porch.

I stared at the headline. *Orange Murderer Claims Third Victim.*

Third?

I read. Last night, according to a Sean O'Reilly, he had fallen asleep while watching television in his living room. He had awakened at nine, and not finding his wife present, had gone looking for her. He had found her dead on the floor of their laundry room, bludgeoned to death. A piece of pipe, bloody, but wiped clean of fingerprints, lay beside her body. An orange was clutched in one of the dead woman's hands.

A neighbor thought she had heard screams earlier in the evening, at eight thirty, and been tempted to phone the police, but then she had decided not to, assuming that it was just a domestic quarrel and she might be wise to keep out of it. O'Reilly had heard no screams.

He explained that he was an extremely heavy sleeper and besides, the TV set had been turned on fairly loud.

I closed my eyes. Well, it was perfectly obvious to me what had really happened. O'Reilly had quarreled with his wife in the laundry room and he had used the pipe to kill her.

I could also account for those thirty minutes O'Reilly claimed he had been sleeping. Instead, after the killing, he had rushed to the refrigerator for an orange and finding none, he had found it necessary to dash out and buy some. When he returned, he put one of them in his dead wife's hand, and *then* he had phoned the police.

I thought that over. The Orange Murderer had used a knife on his first two victims, but this time a piece of pipe? Well, why not? Variety is the spice of death. I would have to cover that point when I wrote to the police. However, since today was Sunday and none of the libraries was open, I would have to wait until Monday.

I expected Jonas at my door momentarily, but he did not stop by until late afternoon. He looked both tired and discouraged.

I let him in. "I suppose that you think I committed the latest Orange Murder too?"

He shook his head wearily. "I *know* you didn't do it."

"You *know*?"

"Yes. I've had you watched ever since the last time I took you to headquarters. Last night, when the third victim, Mrs. O'Reilly, was killed, you were lying right there on the sofa. Asleep or passed out. My man could see you because you forgot to pull the drapes. You didn't move from seven thirty last night until at least ten thirty, when I was told about the O'Reilly murder and called my man off."

I was, of course, happy to have an alibi. "So you finally believe in the existence of the Orange Murderer?"

He would not commit himself. "All I know is that you didn't commit murder number three. I don't know what else to think right now."

He stifled a yawn. "I've been putting in a lot of overtime. I thought I'd just drop in for a minute and bring you up to date."

On Monday morning I went back to work. Naturally I was the center of attention and all of my co-workers assured me that *they* had not for *one* moment ever entertained the idea that I might have murdered my wife. I believed none of them, except for Mrs. Beasley, at the next desk. She is a rather gentle soul who believes the best of everyone.

Around three o'clock someone sneaked an afternoon newspaper into the office.

Orange Murderer Kills Number Four.

Yesterday a Mike Horvath, returning from an afternoon of Sunday bowling, had found his wife dead on the living-room floor. She had been strangled. In the palm of her hand lay a tangerine.

Tangerine?

Well, close enough. I suppose one had to make do with what one had on hand.

After work today I would write letters three and four, the latter explaining the tangerine.

The newspaper was passed around the office and I went back to my books. After a while I noticed Mrs. Beasley at her desk staring into space.

"Is there anything troubling you, Mrs. Beasley?"

She sighed. "Not really. It's just that my husband bought a half-dozen oranges."

"A half-dozen oranges?"

She nodded. "And he's allergic to oranges."

"Then he probably intended them for you."

"But I hate oranges. He *knows* that."

I made a thoughtful guess. "Well, sometimes one loses an allergy as one gets older. Perhaps he intends to re-test himself to see if he's still allergic."

Mrs. Beasley smiled. "But of course. That must be the answer."

I cleared my throat. "Why didn't you ask him?"

"He goes to work before I do and I just noticed them this morning in the refrigerator."

I experienced a rather cold feeling in the pit of my stomach. Perhaps Beasley *was* really re-testing his allergy, but on the other hand was it *possible* that . . .

How many husbands were out there right now checking their refrigerators to make certain they had oranges and waiting for the opportune moment? How many more letters would I have to write for the Orange Murderer in the future?

While it was perfectly true that *some* wives undoubtedly deserved to be murdered, weren't there others, like Mrs. Beasley, who didn't? Trusting wives who probably had a lot of life insurance with their husbands as sole beneficiaries?

What had I wrought?

Could a man of good conscience—and *basically* I was a man of good conscience—allow the murders to continue?

No, he could not.

I could not undo what had already been done, but at least I could prevent a spate of Orange Murders in the days to come. The Orange Murderer must be exposed. Destroyed. He must no longer be available as a convenient cover for future murders, and there was only one way to do that.

I rose from my desk, left the office, and drove directly to police headquarters. I found Sergeant Jonas and confessed to the murder of my wife and the writing of the letters.

The trial was swift and I received a life sentence. However, with good behavior, I confidently expect to be paroled in twelve years and eight months.

So do Pennyfeather, O'Reilly, and Horvath.

I was relieved to discover that in each of their cases the oranges—and the tangerine—had been afterthoughts, not inspirations.

As a matter of fact, having something in common, we have become rather good friends here in Waupon.

When we leave here, the four of us intend to pool our resources and buy an orange grove in Florida.

DETECTIVERSE

NO GENTLEMAN

by LESLIE S. HAUGER

The detective looked at the knife
That derived the body of life.
He asked the man, "Who
Was that lady you slew?"
"That was no lady, that was my wife!"

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